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Week 5 Reading

APA referencing

Thomson, A. (2013). *Anzac memories: Living with the legend*. (2nd Ed., pp. 99–116). Monash University Publishing [large print].

Referencing for family history

Alistair Thomson, *Anzac memories: Living with the legend* (2nd Ed.), Monash University Publishing [large print], Clayton, 2013, pp. 99–116.



Figure 10 Cartoons from The Anzac Book.

CHAPTER 3

MEMORIES OF WAR

Percy Bird

Percy Bird was born in the western Melbourne port suburb of Williamstown in 1889, the youngest of seven brothers and sisters. His mother's family had run a boarding house and his father was a boilermaker with the railways and a Mason, with no political or union interest that Percy could recall. Percy proudly explained that according to family tradition his paternal grandfather's family had owned a shipping line in the old country, and that his grandfather had eloped to Sydney and sold his boat and worked on the harbour. The story highlights the ambiguity of Percy's class position and identity. Though the Birds were 'not a bit wealthy', Percy was careful to define his family as 'near enough we'll say to the middle class'. This contrasts with most of my other western suburbs interviewees, who defined their backgrounds and social position as 'working class'. The Birds aspired to the middle-class lifestyle and values of church, association and education, and Percy adopted these ideals and subsequently sought professional

training and positions with professional status, albeit limited and subordinate, in his army and working life.[1]

In our first interview Percy described an idyllic childhood in Williamstown. He went to the local State school, was prominent in several sporting teams, and sang as a soloist in the Presbyterian Sunday School choir. He was also an enthusiastic member of the Williamstown Boys' Naval Brigade and participated in its band, in public military displays and camping holidays. Percy enjoyed remembering these aspects of his childhood; he had already helped researchers into the histories of baseball and the Boys' Naval Brigade. In the second interview he admitted that when he read the first transcript he realised that 'he didn't have such a wonderful time' because he was the youngest and had to run messages for the family and neighbours. Percy's explanation hints at a general unease about his childhood which is usually hidden by the enthusiastic remembering of organised youth activities. This childhood unease about private life and relationships was repeated in adult life, where public activities remained the most affirming for Percy and became the mainstay of his identity and remembering.[2]

In 1904 Percy left school and, on his mother's advice, attended a business college. The following year he started work as a clerk with

the Victorian railways. He still lived with his family in Williamstown, where he was active in local sports teams, the church choir and the Australian Natives Association branch. Unlike most of my other interviewees, Percy was already in his mid-twenties in 1914, and had been in regular employment for almost ten years. He was also engaged to be married to Eva Linklater. In the interview he didn't recall any strong personal response to the outbreak of war, and explained that he delayed enlisting until July of 1915 because his father was dying. I asked him why he enlisted:

Oh[laughs]. Be like all the others[laughs]. I wanted to enlist like all the others, you know. Well, like lots of the others, I should say, because I thought I was ... well, I was ... should enlist. Being a member of ... being an Australian.[3]

When I listened to the tape I was struck by the awkwardness and discomfort of Percy's reply. Enlistment was not one of Percy's standard anecdotes (unlike some other veterans for whom it is an important signpost in memory), and the awkward form of the account of enlistment contrasted sharply with his usual, confident storytelling. Enlistment did not become one of Percy's stories because at the time it required a difficult choice between competing demands. In the memories of most of my interviewees the

story of enlistment is highly significant and fraught with contradictions. It reveals a struggle to make sense of a decision that may have been difficult at the time, which sometimes had disastrous personal consequences, and for which public regard has shifted dramatically, from wartime enthusiasm through to doubt, ambivalence and even opposition.

On the one hand Percy was influenced by his perceived duty as an Australian which he had learnt in the Boys' Naval Brigade and the Australian Natives Association, and which became a predominant motif of recruiting rhetoric. He was also affected by the subtle pressure of mates who had joined up; later in the interview he remarked that he 'had to go' because his pals were going. On the other hand, the family trauma of his father's illness and the commitment to a new fiancée were countervailing pressures that made enlistment difficult. Enlistment represented a choice between two different prescriptions of masculinity, between the family man and the independent soldier adventurer. The pressures to join up and be a soldiering man were stronger, and to justify the decision—especially necessary in relation to his family and fiancée—the explanations of duty and mateship became the main features of Percy's account. In turn, these explanations were consolidated by wartime public approval; though

in later life Percy would be further troubled by public questioning of the worth of Australian participation in 'a European war'. Enlistment never became a favoured public story for Percy because it recalled the old tension and hidden pain. It is perhaps significant that he never discussed Eva's feelings about his decision, or how she and his family were affected by his absence.[4]

Following his difficult decision to enlist, Percy Bird was sent to Egypt with a unit of reinforcements for the 5th Battalion of the AIF. On the ship his clerical skills were discovered and he was made Orderly Room Sergeant for the duration of the voyage. After a period of training in Egypt and at Étapes, Percy joined D Company of the 5th Battalion at Bonneville in July 1916, just after the battalion suffered heavy casualties in the first battle for Pozières. After a short spell in the line at Pozières he went with the battalion to Belgium for six weeks, and then returned to the Somme for the winter of 1916–17. In February 1917 he was reappointed as an Orderly Room Sergeant for the battalion. The new job at battalion headquarters took him out of his company and, for the most part, out of front-line fighting, although he still went up the line on occasional tasks. The line also came to him on one occasion at Lagnicourt in May 1917, when the battalion headquarters was

almost overrun by the enemy. While at Lagnicourt he was gassed, and in August he had a life-saving operation on a gland in his neck. He ended up in a hospital in Weymouth, and from there was shipped to Australia on the day before the Melbourne Cup horse race in 1917.

There were a number of key issues in Percy's experience and identity during the war. Like every infantry soldier he had to cope with life in the front line. Though his experience of the front was not as severe as that of many other diggers—he was only in a fighting unit for about six months, and in all of that time D Company never went 'over the top'—he did endure the bombardment of Second Pozières and the miserable conditions of the Somme winter of 1916–17. Most of Percy's stories about the front refer to the difficulties of getting through the mud and finding the line, and the lack of food because ration parties were bogged or lost:

The 1916–17 winter was the worst for thirty years, and the mud was shocking. Well, we were up the line one time for three days and three nights and you know what we had to eat? Bread and milk. Sodden bread, Tommy cookers, condensed milk[...] they ducked out with a couple of dixies to get some shell-hole water and we mixed it with the condensed milk and heat it, you see, and the captain said to

me—there were about twenty of us in this dugout—he said, 'How much?' I said, 'Two mouthfuls each'. Went round, I said, 'Fill a mouthful'. And that's what we did[laughs]. [5]

Memorandum

A. M. A. T. Enripotes

Alexandra

8 May 1916

On the Voyage of A. M. A. T. Enripotes A14 conveying a very large body of troops from Melbourne to Alexandria, I appointed Sergeant P. B. Bird of the 17th reinforcements to the 5th Battalion A. I. S. as orderly Room Sergeant, showing that he made no/ argue he appreciated himself diligently to the cause and carried out his duties to my entire satisfaction. It would be difficult to find a more capable and trustworthy N. C. O. and I am with confidence recommending him for a similar position.

Alfred B. Pearce
Lt. Colonel

Figure 11 Letter of commendation for Percy Bird, 1916.
(Kath Hunter)

The 5th Battalion history confirms that these were important features of the battalion's

experience of that winter on the Somme, in which even getting to the line was a miserable experience of 'wading, crawling, wallowing in mud for hours through the darkness'. [6]

Humorous anecdotes helped Percy and the men of D Company to cope with these physical hardships (the stories are still his main way of remembering the winter of 1916-17), but the conditions did not cause major emotional problems for Percy. In contrast, silences and repressions in his remembering suggest that he did not cope so well with the artillery bombardments that were the other main feature of life on the Somme. The battalion history describes the scene when Percy first went into the front line at Pozieres' 'Death Valley' on 14 August 1916:

The whole of the shell-rent surface was torn into the ghastliest commixture of decaying dead, tattered clothing and broken equipment[...] Stinking corpses, or portions of them, everywhere exuded their foul gases[...] forming a dreadful paving on which performe the men walked.

The job of D Company was to dig hopping-off trenches for other battalions, all the time under intense shell-fire and suffering severe casualties, unable to respond in any way to the bombardment. According to the history it was 'a time of nerve-wracking passivity for the Fifth'.

Yet every time I asked Percy what it felt like to be under shell-fire he changed the subject back to one of his standard stories about concert parties behind the lines or getting bogged in the mud. He volunteered no stories about the smells and sounds of the trenches, about his own feelings under fire, or about the mutilation and deaths of his mates. The most that he could say in the first interview, before he changed the subject, was, 'I think we were all frightened but we all stuck together'. [7]

In the second interview, perhaps because there was greater trust between us, and because I was expressly trying to guide him out of his set sequence of stories, Percy expressed a few more clues about those feelings. He said that he did not like watching the 'Anzacs' television series because it brought back painful memories of dead pals. After I had repeated the question about his feelings several times, he rushed through a set of disturbing memories that had not been in his previous written or spoken remembering—of watching helplessly while another battalion was 'knocked to ribbons', and of two NCOs being blown up just after he walked away from them—before changing the subject again. [8]

The way in which Percy told these stories, and avoided telling them, suggests that like many others he was extremely distressed by these

experiences in the firing line. Though he denied that his nerves had been affected, he did remark that 'we were glad to get away. I will admit that'. None of Percy's stories were positive about his worth as a fighting man, and that role was virtually excluded from his remembering because he could make no safe or comfortable sense of it either at the time or subsequently. The evidence for the traumatic effects of bombardment lies in the silences of his remembering. Disturbing experiences and feelings were either repressed from conscious memory or pushed aside into a 'private' drawer of Percy's memory, from where they came out only under pressure, in response to probing questions, or by association and in dreams, but never in his public stories.[9]

Repression of the most disturbing aspects of bombardment was only one way in which Percy coped with the experience. The refrain 'we were frightened but we all stuck together', which Percy repeated several times, testifies to the physical and emotional support provided by the men of D Company. In sticking together the soldiers developed their own language, stories and songs which made the experience easier to live with. Percy's oral skills ensured that he was actively involved in that process of collective narration. Many of his standard stories were told and enjoyed during the war. Thus stories about

lucky escapes (an Orderly Sergeant who has a shell go between his legs and bury itself in the ground while he is asleep) and the language they employed ('Fritz' lobbing over 'a couple of shells'), made sense of the experience of bombardment with humour, bravado and a touch of fatalism. Percy's stories did not make sense of the war in terms of bitterness or disillusionment, partly because most of his war experience was in relative safety behind the lines, and partly because he enjoyed good relations with his superior officers and had an uncritical attitude towards the military authorities and their decisions. His own experiences were almost always generalised in terms of the positive, collective experience of the unit, and formed a repertoire of affirming stories. Over time the stories and soldiers' songs came to stand for the experience of the trenches and provided Percy with comfortable ways of remembering.[10]

Percy's masculine and military identity was also troubled by his redeployment to clerical duties behind the lines. Both on the ship and at the beginning of 1917, Percy protested that he did not want to leave the company, and he recalled the move as 'unfortunate'. It was 'unfortunate' partly because it took Percy away from his friends in D Company, but also because Percy felt guilty about leaving his mates, and inferior in his non-combat role (a wound was a

valid excuse, and Percy had no qualms about admitting that he was glad to get away to Australia after he was wounded). To compensate for feelings of guilt and masculine inadequacy, Percy seems to have revelled in the dangers of his life behind the lines, and to have highlighted them in his memory; indeed, there is far more military action and excitement in these stories than in his account of life in the line. He also developed a positive alternative identity for himself by taking pride in his competence as Orderly Room Sergeant and in the compliments of senior staff officers.[11]

Even more affirming for Percy's military identity were the experiences of his life with the battalion out of the line, when front-line and support soldiers shared the common identity of the battalion. At these times Percy came into his own as a performer and enjoyed the acclamation of the soldiers as 'Birdy', a star of battalion concerts. For example, Percy represented D Company in a battalion concert competition in which prize money of one hundred francs was offered to the company with the best singers:

So I sang that night and I got an encore, and then when it was all over they had a committee passing the votes and everything. So the next morning the captain we had, oh thrilled to bits, we got the

three first prizes and the best effort. Seventy out of a hundred[laughs].[12]

This was the story that Percy told when I first asked him about life on the Somme, and he subsequently repeated it with great gusto. Performance out of the line was the main way in which he gained affirmation from the men in his battalion, and the most positive aspect of Percy's identity as a soldier. It became a central feature of his remembering of the war because in comparison with other aspects of his war experience it was entirely positive, and because the recreation of wartime performance—in stories punctuated by song—was popular with postwar audiences.

Percy also enjoyed his reputation as a scrounger of food; both officers and other ranks often came to him to share the food that he had acquired from local villagers. But he was less comfortable with other aspects of digger culture. Because of his job Percy mixed closely with staff and battalion officers and, in contrast with almost all my other interviewees, in his remembering he highlighted occasions when he sought and received their praise. Though Percy edited out of his remembering any tensions between officers and men in the 5th Battalion, even the battalion history recorded such tensions, and other sources note the diggers' renowned antipathy to men who were

overfamiliar with officers. It may be that some of the battalion's other ranks frowned upon Percy's comfortable relationship with his superiors.[13]

More obviously troubling for Percy were the differences between his social standards and what he perceived to be the prevailing standards of behaviour among the diggers. Because of his Presbyterian upbringing Percy didn't drink or smoke, and he felt that he was unusual in this regard. In the interview he emphasised his differences in a recollection that his one 'vice' was lollies, and that he supplied the men with sweets when they ran out of cigarettes ('Got any lollies, Birdy?'). Percy also felt that he was different in his attitude to women. He claimed that he 'never worried about the women folk' because he was engaged, and because he disapproved of the other fellows who 'used to go to see the women there for certain purposes[...]' certain ones, unfortunately, they were caught, certain diseases'. He was also rather disgusted by the men's jokes about sex and masturbation:

[...] where we were sleeping and that, somebody would yell out, 'The old squire's been foully murdered'. And of course, they'd all 'What? Again?' This seemed to be one of the little jokes. Poor joke I thought it was.

On one occasion at a new battalion billet when Percy was looking for a quiet place to read, he came upon a 'young lady' in a 'lovely big place'. They swapped coins and talked, and for the next two nights Percy returned to sit with her. Yet he refused to tell his mates where he had been because he thought the relationship would be misunderstood and his character smeared.[14]

These stories suggest that despite his skills as a singer, story-teller and scrounger, Percy sometimes felt like an outsider among the diggers, excluded by his own ideal and practice of moral manhood from the more larrikin masculinity that he perceived to be predominant. When prompted by my questions, he expressed ambivalence about the diggers' behaviour and concern that the digger reputation was not true for men like him, but on the whole he preferred not to discuss these aspects of life out of the line. This contrasts with some of the other interviewees who relished the drinking and gambling and highlighted it in their memories.[15] Throughout the interview Percy referred to the Australian soldiers as 'Anzacs' or 'Australians' but never 'diggers', perhaps because he felt uncomfortable about the digger identity of the other ranks.

In contrast, the common unit identities of D Company, the 5th Battalion and the AIF were

comfortable and affirming for Percy. The company and battalion identities were reinforced by the bonding of life together, in and out of the line, and by the inter-unit rivalry of battalion and brigade sports meetings and concerts. Thus Percy proudly identified himself as a 'Don Company' man. The memoir that he wrote for me about his war was an account of the 5th Battalion in France, because at the time and in memory the identity of the battalion was affirming for Percy, and because he had shaped his personal war story in terms of the battalion's story.

National identity was also significant for Percy, and this, too, he used to help comprehend and articulate his experiences. Percy's sense of his Australian identity was drawn, to some extent, from personal experience. For example, while loading supplies for English and French officers he noted that they treated the diggers with less respect than their own Australian officers, who were willing to negotiate about rights and responsibilities and got a better job as a result. He observed that, in contrast with his own battalion, English units often left their billets in a mess, and he overheard remarks by English officers who were surprised at the quality of an Australian drill, and by some French women who felt that they were 'safe now, Australia's here'. [16]

The specific, national meanings of these and other similar anecdotes were articulated within Percy's unit, and in newspapers, books and even official commendations. The story about the French women was a common, apocryphal tale within the ALF, and 'everybody reckoned the Australian soldiers ... they made a big name for themselves, and they were the best soldiers to get anywhere'. Public opinion about the Australians thus helped Percy to articulate his experiences in a particular, nationalistic way, and in turn led him to highlight in his memory experiences that made sense in terms of this national pride. Although Percy could not relate his trench experiences in terms of the Anzac hero—the gap between his experience and that aspect of the legend was too great—he could enjoy the more general and official collective identity of the ALF. The Australian national identity worked for Percy because, like the identities of the company and the battalion, it was an affirming and inclusive identity that did not necessarily distinguish between Australians in and out of the line, between officers and others ranks, or between different standards of behaviour. In those terms, being an Australian was something Percy had in common with his fellows, which also proudly distinguished them from other soldiers. [17]

Yet during the war the affirmation of Percy's experience through national identification was undermined by tensions between his own experiences and attitudes and the Anzac and digger prescriptions for masculinity. Only when the war finished and those tensions were no longer part of lived experience, would Percy's war memory and identity become less troubled.

Bill Langham

Bill Langham was born in 1897 in Axdale, a small town about forty miles from the central Victorian provincial city of Bendigo. The Langham family of thirteen had to survive on the meagre income Bill's father's made from quarrying and woodcutting work—about a pound a week—and Bill's memory of his childhood is summarised in the familiar language of his generation and class: 'We were a good happy family, but we were very poor, and I don't mind admitting how many a time I went to school with a bit of dry bread, in those days'. Apart from enjoying the outdoors' freedom of a country boy, Bill loved to read, especially history, and he was awarded a framed Merit Certificate when he completed the last two grades of primary school within six months. He accepted a place at Bendigo High School but, as he recalled, 'the war settled me as a student. That came along and I went to the war and

there was no more education'. This claim that the war caused Bill to sacrifice opportunities for further school and university study was repeated in both interviews. Yet further questioning revealed that Bill actually ran away from high school and home before the outbreak of war because he'd 'had school'. He got a casual job picking up fleeces in a shearing shed near Bendigo, and then headed to Melbourne to work in the Caulfield racing stables. He had been a keen rider as a boy, and now hoped to follow in the footsteps of a brother who was a country jockey: 'course the war intervened and altered all that'. [18]

The war did disrupt Bill's plans and aspirations, but in his remembering he highlighted that disruption and played down other factors for a number of reasons. The war provided an obvious and socially acceptable explanation for change and loss. Bill's explanation allowed him the sympathy and understanding due to a victim of circumstance, and mitigated his own agency in the 'sacrifice' of his education, improved job prospects and enlistment. Finally, the disruption of war became the necessary backdrop for Bill's conclusion that he was able to overcome his wartime sacrifices and make a success of the rest of his life. In his remembering Bill satisfied the need for an affirming memory by emphasising his active role in the successes of his life, and